

# Review of *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien, Myth and Memory*

by Patrick Curry (Floris Books, 1997)

Contemporary literary analysis is dominated by a plethora of 'isms'. There are modernism, post-modernism, structuralism, deconstructionism, feminism and many, many more. Marxism might be a highly endangered species elsewhere but has found a secure niche in the fast expanding habitat of Cultural Studies. Conspicuously absent amidst all these wonders of wordplay is the ecological dimension, one which locates texts and their authors in something wider and deeper than the well-trodden turf of class and gender.

All cultural activity interacts with the broader ecological community in a rich variety of ways. The shallowness, aimlessness and frequent nihilism of much modern writing, for example, are expressions of society dangerously adrift from its ecological roots. The failure of contemporary literary discourse to recognise the green dimension stems, in part, from its grounding in the dominant worldview. It looks at the world through spectacles inherited from the Enlightenment. These have been further distorted by heavy doses of the politically correct but bankrupt 'everything-is-relative-and-as-good-as-anything-else' school of thought.

However, there have been writers and many other artists who have been able to take a leaf out of Nature's book — they have been both stimulated by her wonders and angered by her violation. Patrick Curry's new book shows that the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, notably his voluminous *Lord of the Rings*, are part of this tradition. Obviously, there is a danger that an ecologically informed study of literature might repeat the error in some schools of thought which judge the literary value of, say, Victorian novels by their stance on imperialism. Nor do we need a green version of socialist realism and the rule of a new Zhadanov, the tsar of culture under Stalin.

Fortunately, such dangers seem avoidable. Ecology might provide the overarching narrative for literary theory but this does not mean that everything should be judged according to that framework. There is no need nor point in following those Marxists who analysed every aspect of our being through the lens of a diabolical and hysterical materialism.

Already, there is strong evidence of the dividends yielded by the ecological approach. One pioneer was, of course, Theodore Roszak whose seminal study *Where the Wasteland Ends*. (1973) contained, amongst much other wisdom, an illuminating discussion of the Romantic Movement. Other notable contributors to an ecological literature and to literary theory include Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder, Joseph Meeker and Paul Shepard. We should also learn from late historian Christopher Lasch who made many telling points about the decay of contemporary literary studies and indeed modern intellectual endeavour as a whole.

Curry has made a major contribution to this canon (an explosive word these days!). His subject, J.R.R. Tolkien, has become one of the most popular of 20th. century writers, one keenly attuned to the natural world and the communities of which it is composed. His writings provide, then, an ideal case study for an investigation into how the tools of literature provided a vehicle for someone deeply concerned about the waste and destruction wrought by on-going industrialisation and economic growth.

As Curry points out, there is an added interest in Tolkien's work. It lies in the striking contrast between, on the one hand, his popularity amongst the public, and, on the other, the comparatively low esteem with which he is held by literary critics and theorists. According to the cultural cognoscenti, Tolkien's tales are nothing more than silly little stories, devoid of any social interest or artistic merit. It would be wrong, of course, to put public taste on some pedestal. It would be easy to cite massively popular novels, magazines and newspapers that plumb the depths of ignorance and prejudice—sadly, Jeffrey Archer blockbusters sell by the truckload. But, in this case, Curry amply demonstrates, it is the savants who have got it wrong.

It is, of course, somewhat curious to find a book written by an Oxford don attracting a cult following amongst a truly diverse audience, including 60s hippies. But the explanation is no so difficult since Tolkien's questioning of that great idol, Progress, is likely to appeal to anyone dismayed by the wreckage being wrought in its pursuit. Curry takes his readers through the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* showing how its plot, characters and underlying themes challenge the whole industrial order. Conversely, it is interesting that an apologist for the status quo such as Michael Allaby chooses to rubbish his former associates in the ecological movement by referring to them as "timid little hobbits" for refusing to worship at the shrine of Technology and Economic Growth (see his contributions to *The Politics of Self-Sufficiency*)

Tolkien's work raises a host of issues, not least those of free will versus predestination and of decay versus renewal. He casts some illumination on that old dilemma, right versus wrong (not least whether good people should use the weapons of evil—i.e. the 'ring' of *Lord of the Rings*—to defeat Evil). Curry's study provides a sure-footed guide here too. His style is vigorous, avoiding the longeurs of academic works but not sacrificing intellectual rigour.

Tolkien's achievement should not be doubted. In his books and especially *Lord of the Rings* he devised a whole new world ('Middle Earth'), populated by a rich diversity of beings, many of whom he equipped with detailed genealogies and languages. Contrary to many authors in the fantasy genre, Tolkien also managed to spin a great tale. Despite a few excesses, notably when characters announce (again!) impending doom, *Lord of the Rings* manages to impart a mass of detail yet retain its digestibility. Sadly, in modern society where many of its inmates have been 'dumbed down' by a diet of heavily processed McNuggets (this dismal menu is dominated by news flashes, tabloid tittle-tattle, chat shows, 'shoot-em-up' computer games). Tolkien's lengthy tome simply might demand too much.

There will be those who dismiss Tolkien as nothing but a soft-headed romantic, befuddled by nostalgia for mythical golden age of bygone times. Certainly he offers no programme for social reconstruction nor strategy to reverse society's disastrous course. Yet Tolkien managed to spotlight critical features of the modern malaise, pose questions and suggest alternatives. His sense of 'rightness' matches the wisdom of Aldo Leopold rightly celebrated "Land Ethic". Countless articles have been written about the philosophical basis of conservation as well as the utilitarian benefits of preserving different species. Few rival the wise words Tolkien puts in the mouth of Gandalf when talking to the Ent 'tree-herder' Treebeard. "You have not plotted to cover all the world with your trees and choke all other living things" (which, of course, is precisely what, right now, humankind is doing, more than ever). Indeed, the chapters relating to the Ents and the fight against Saruman at Isengard contain wonderful evocations of the evils of deforestation.

Curry demonstrates that nostalgia can be a potent force for reshaping the world on better lines. For a start, it can puncture illusions about the achievements of techno-industrial 'civilisation', exposing its flaws. More importantly, the different ways of living and thinking about things that characterised previous societies show that there is no immutable 'human nature', something that makes environmental destruction, economic exploitation and political oppression inevitable aspects of human existence.

However, some of the paeans to monarchy that pepper the final parts of Tolkien's trilogy (they relate to Aragorn's ascendancy to the throne) still stick in my republican throat. Perhaps Curry is too keen to defend Tolkien from his many detractors that he devotes insufficient attention to less attractive aspects of Tolkien's fantasy world. Certainly, he should have addressed more fully the somewhat misogynist feel to *Lord of the Rings*. Middle Earth is very much a man's world: 'ordinary' women characters are conspicuous by their almost complete absence. There are Galadriel and Eowyn but their parts seldom transcend well-worn stereotypes. There might also have been closer scrutiny of the rigid hierarchies assumed by Tolkien. Once evil has been overcome, normality in Middle Earth is a matter of kings and queens lording it over every one else. Blood and lineage are what matter. Good folk know their place and go about their business, leaving the big issues to the social betters.

The most disappointing thing about Curry's book actually is its cover. In a somewhat desperate attempt to exploit today's direct action protest movement, the book's jacket features a pixie-like hippie, presumably tied to a tree in an attempt to stop its felling for the sake of some new road or airport extension. Such a representation merely serves the dominant order by caricaturing opponents as harmless eccentrics and worthless drop-outs. Otherwise, the publishers have served the author well and the price of the hardback version is reasonable given the riches it contains.

**Sandy Irvine**